

Leading and Managing Multi-Agency Contexts

Report on the Leading Practice seminar
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1 Setting the scene

Travellers in time?

You don't need to understand the plot when Dr Who seals the Rift at the Medusa Cascade to know that all the great human emotions and dramas are being played out – and so much to want truth, virtue and love to conquer all. In the story, the human race in the present is threatened by the human race from the future and sealing the rift in time and space is the solution to the Paradox, 'if the human race today were to be destroyed, how could there be a future?'.

All of which came to mind because at NCSL's Leading Practice Seminar in June, just after the Dr Who episode was broadcast, rift, paradox and time were recurring themes. Participants' reflections on what had been learned about emerging leadership and management in multi-agency partnerships kept returning to the themes which, in this context, may well be beyond the help of Dr Who's laser screwdriver.

- First, there seems to be a widespread perception of a rift between something called the 'Standards Agenda' and something called the 'ECM Agenda'. A lot of emotional and physical energy is being spent on struggling with the rift though it might anyway be an illusion.
- Then, a paradox emerges because there can't be many (are there any?) people in the public education service who argue that young people should not be as healthy, safe, happily achieving, socially contributing and economically secure as we can possibly make them, which is surely the ECM Agenda, so how can there be a rift?
- Finally, our discussions and arguments might look very puzzling to an observer from the past or the future. In a reversal of the Dr Who experience, are we in danger of impairing our own legacy? Will our colleagues in a decade or two be disappointed that we became frustrated so early in the ECM programme or will they be celebrating our perseverance? Will we have built on our professional inheritance from nineteenth century pioneers who saw universal free education as an extension of their philanthropy and of the twentieth century innovators who either side of Beveridge's 1942 assault on "want, disease, *ignorance*, squalor and idleness" introduced school meals, health inspections, education welfare services, nurture classes and pastoral systems? Or will our impatience with slow and uneven progress have undermined that?

Commitment and purpose

First claim on our attention ought not, though, to go towards the anxieties but shift instead and quickly to two buoyant themes at the heart of the June seminar.

- The commitment and sense of purpose which permeated the day and
- the vitality of the practice which was revealed and shared.

Commitment and purpose were shared from a variety of roles and contexts (and continents). Everyone endorsed the view that multi-agency collaboration in one form or another should and could work for the benefit of children and young people. Everyone supported the proposition that schools held some influence over and so some responsibility for the wider range of student outcomes. Everyone agreed that leadership would have to be shared and distributed beyond traditional institutional boundaries. The hard question at the centre of conversations was not 'whether?' but 'what and how?'.

The many examples of 'what and how' were helpfully set in the context of the leadership that national and local government bodies can provide and the limitations they experience. Not every school leader, parent and taxpayer shares the same commitment or purpose and the presentations made by Anne Frost from DCSF and Rick Lohan from Barnsley were

reminders of the complexity of the political, statutory and administrative pressures that national and local government are dealing with.

Progress and strategy

Many of us are impatient for an ever stronger and more focused national sponsorship of ECM and its associated policies. Anne Frost's summary of DCSF's strategy was a reminder of the progress being made from what, we ought to remember, was the professionally frustrating and sometimes personally tragic labyrinth of services which the millennium inherited – and to which some of us had contributed! Behavioural change is always a bigger challenge to central government (and to private sector Head Offices) than structural change. That is as true for the government's own departments and central directorates as it is for the more local organisations and services they oversee. Nonetheless, three years into a ten year programme, the alignment of 'integrated tools and processes' with 'integrated front line delivery' is now a national tactic for delivering better outcomes for young people. Not least among the processes and provisions and very visible to schools, is the emergence of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the Lead Professional Role operating through Children's Centres and Extended Schools, all contributing to earlier intervention and prevention.

Rick Lohan's description of the Local Authority's approach in Barnsley built on the national perspective, illustrating with little mention of structures or re-structuring the cultural change that a local authority can nurture. Barnsley is using a combination of the Local Area Agreement, locality based 'Well Being Partnerships' and common goals to configure services around the experience of young people rather than vice versa. "Disconnected services," Rick reminded us, "are hard wired for failure". Working that electric metaphor for what it's worth, it appears that Barnsley is providing the ducting to penetrate the barriers by encouraging a shared core vision, sense of moral purpose and collective responsibility in which autonomy for services and schools is not confused with independence and in which families or communities play active roles,. CAF and TAC (Common Assessment Framework and Team Around the Child) provide the wiring and connections and, if the metaphor stretches this far, the current is running, the elements are warming up. The redesign of structures might well follow, as it seems to be in Barnsley, and will be more likely to succeed if the infrastructure is already well grounded (should that be earthed?).

Strategy – who does what ?

There is, it seemed on reflection, one thing which neither national nor local government can do, one thing they should resist trying to do and one thing they could certainly do:

- Neither can provide certainty or perfect synergy in their work. We will wait in vain for that to happen. In an open democracy, government organisations are constantly managing our communities' (and, closer to home, our schools') different and sometimes contradictory expectations about the purpose, outcomes, costs and processes of public services. We can advise, cajole and lobby for our interest in all of that and criticise the lumpiness of it all as much as we like. The most powerful contribution practitioners can make is to develop the work when and where we can, provide the evidence of what works for young people and be advocates for the consequent change. That is the direct route to influencing policy-makers and administrators.
- Neither should try to micro-manage the change or processes or outcome targets. The diversity of emerging practice shows that there is no national template to fit every local authority and no local template to fit every community. This might be a particular challenge for local government if or when the 'management horizon' seems temptingly close enough to control. Stories of inch thick CAF Guidance might be urban myths in some places, but not everywhere.
- Both should create the spaces in which the best cross-service, multi-disciplinary work can develop. Promoting the culture and values which lead inevitably to collaboration and

removing the barriers which inhibit it are the gift these organisations can bring to the party.

Practice

In turn, the practitioners can and did provide a buffet of practical multi-agency activity and evident improvement. Some of that was contained in the set-piece presentations and case study discussions and even more was revealed by occasional comments and asides when people made a passing reference to how their own local work was similar to the topic on the table. The presentations and case studies illustrated some key themes, in particular:

The importance of locality planning and provision

Sheffield LA's vision for 'Service Districts' each with a Partnership Board representing key interests, not least the community and its young people alongside professionals, like Barnsley's 'Well Being Partnerships', illustrated the kind of locality approach many LAs are exploring. Each 'Service District Partnership Board' will be commissioned by the LA to achieve challenging but realistic goals for its young people. Some of the priorities will be identified by the centre and some by the Service District's own Board which will be provided with the authority to make decisions about its share of the available resources to pursue the goals.

The potential for schools at the service hub

No service seemed impermeable and no boundary seemed too high or too far for the extended school experiences described by colleagues from Mitchell High, Elm Court and George Green, two secondary and a special school. Each, in a unique solution for its locality, has placed itself at the centre of services for local children, literally in geography at the centre, metaphorically in leadership from the centre. Health advisers, family therapists, police officers, social workers, youth workers, careers coordinators, family liaison workers were among the host of professionals whose work spins around a centre of gravity provided by these schools. Educational and other provision is offered to every imaginable age group and across the community. There is no apparent blueprint for the range of services any one school could or should offer, still less for how the connections should be organised. There was, though, a powerful unifying theme in their belief that this approach is benefiting the pupils, families, staff (of all the services) and community.

The development for leadership in multi-agency contexts

The National Professional Qualification in Integrated Children's Centre Leadership (NPQICL) is a qualification for which the medium is the message and the message reverberated through many of the conversations. Children's Centre Leadership, like leadership in every multi-agency context has to balance a series of complexities: contrasting ideas about 'service integration', being an equal and a leader in the same partnership, balancing leadership *for* and leadership *with* the community, building on the wealth of professional heritage and undermining administrative silos. All of which demands a professional development process reflecting and celebrating the managerial styles that need to be followed. So, in NPQICL particular attention is given to collective enquiry, the leader as learner and learner as leader, task group work, reflective practice and mentoring. Although, relevant research and theory can be introduced at the right moments, it follows that in a new field there is no received wisdom and that the fundamental needs are about understanding a portfolio of skills and the developing capacity to apply values and principles. The new leader is a creative partner not (to caricature) an administrative manager.

2 Identifying the learning

In the seminar, for a short while, we talked the best of all possible worlds: national government set the context, local government nurtured the culture and practitioners, moving into those spaces, created services capable of moulding and remoulding themselves around young people's complex lives. That's not the world we live in most of the time but if in the seminar we could describe an ideal type and identify existing examples of its parts, we know we have the materials for systemic construction.

Connections and patterns in delivery

We saw and heard some imaginative and humbling examples of new connections and patterns in service delivery. The things we think could happen are probably already in train somewhere around the country. We learned that we have to get better and better at telling these stories.

- Many of the narratives spoke about the fragile, vulnerable nature of what had been achieved so far – a recurring anxiety about sustainability.
- Few of the narrators spoke as confidently as they were entitled about what they had achieved – a recurring diffidence and references to what might have been better or whether it was the right thing to do, while the rest of us wondered how on earth they'd done it at all.
- Only some of the narrators shared the process for creating their new approach (still less the pain that might have gone with that) – a recurring emphasis on the (relatively) clean cut description of what we do now rather than the messy way we got there.

An enabling environment : legislation, structures and sponsors

We confirmed that legislation and administrative structures are marginal to small scale innovation but critical to systemic change. Legislation and structures rarely make it entirely possible or completely impossible for practitioners to do what they think is right for young people – but those features can make it a whole lot easier or more difficult. The one repeated caveat to this perspective was the need for Health Services to be in some way or other compelled into local partnerships. Otherwise, the best new activity is likely to emerge where the local people are personally motivated and to flourish where the local, intermediate and national rhythms have some synergy. Many of the developments shared at the seminar were conceived before the 2003 ECM announcements. They were rooted in the interests of teachers or other professionals and dependent on the opportunities they had seized. They come into being and can persist on a small scale without direct national or local government approval. To blossom and spread, they now need the care and attention of a 'system level' sponsor.

Principles and values

We were clear that a system level sponsor needs to be confident that 'not being in control' is not the same as 'being out of control' – micro-management will not work when the end is not finite and clear, when different configurations, processes and outcomes might all be evidence of success. In these circumstances, clarity of principles and values can drive change at a pace. Policy directives alone, from any level, can founder on the habits of leaders and the culture of services so it becomes more important for central and local government to create the context than to manage services directly. Particularly at local levels, they were recommended to do an inventory of the local social capital between services and communities – there might be more in the bank than they expect. This is an approach which matches the national policy momentum for community leadership and the local authority role as service commissioner. Policy should move with service development, legislation should accommodate it and structure lag a tad behind.

ECM & Standards

We realised that an important part of the present cultural context is the perception of a rift between the 'core work' of schools and the 'ECM Agenda'. The latter, in particular, seems to have taken on a substance and life of its own. Many colleagues in the education service might still describe the 'ECM Agenda' as being about Children's Centres, Extended Schools, Community Participation and restructuring of the local authority, adding that all of this is a distraction from their main task of raising standards by the end of Key Stages Two and Four. There is less sense that the agenda is simple and about children being safe, healthy, happy, achieving, participating and financially secure. Those other, technocratic changes will contribute – but they are the means not the end. There is a major piece of work still to be done explaining the Agenda and its compatibility with traditional school standards. The evidence from the Manchester University research that *"Specifically, there is initial evidence that FSES approaches can be associated with benefits for schools in terms of improvements on performance measures (such as student attainment and exclusion rates) and increased intake numbers."*¹ deserves the widest possible dissemination.

The uncertainty principle

We accepted that a less than prescriptive approach from 'above' does require us to live with a kind of professional example of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle for subatomic particles – in lay terms, as soon as we start to pin something down, it will change position and nature, just because we are looking at it. Professionals cannot expect central or local government to define the how, when and where of what should be done to create the best multi-agency services. We don't like that kind of approach anyway (c.f. reactions to the primary strategy) and it is even more improbable when the system needs to experiment. Local school and service managers need the space to say they don't have the answers either. What we think we need to do locally might not survive engagement with other professionals and community voice but that is not an argument for not stepping forward. No-one knows all the best ways to 'distribute authority and retain responsibility', as one contributor described the requirement. We have to acknowledge that this is a shared enquiry into new ways of working and a shared bid for the contested high ground of policy approval.

System wide social capital

We agreed that in a shared enquiry, the social capital is something which needs to be tended by every leader and manager, not only those in national and local government, but also those in schools and local services. There were at least three profound points in seminar which exposed limitations on our shared inability to build social capital across the system.

- First, someone was heard to ask, 'Where is the bottom, when people here talk about supporting bottom-up innovation? They think they are the bottom but they're not. Parents and children deserve their say and schools aren't always so keen on that.'
- Second, someone asked, 'The DfES wants the Common Assessment as a tool in a simple, standard, joined-up format. Most families' want to avoid endlessly repetitive accounts to different professionals of their details and case history. Most professionals want to share information easily and, when necessary, quickly. That's a virtuous triangle of forces. So at why does CAF become a battle for control between professional empires or emerge as bureaucratic guidance thick with legal caveats and expensive on paper? Why don't we think 'it's for the kids, stupid'.'
- Third, there were repeated allusions to what seemed to be the education service's prerogative to lead. Social care colleagues in particular and sometimes other services were said to be 'coming on board at last' though 'they don't use the same language' – whose ship, whose jargon? Or how important it is for Directors of Children's Services to have an education background as if some of the best are not from other backgrounds?

¹ Evaluation of the Full Service Extended Schools Initiative, Second Year: Thematic Papers DFES 2007

‘Disciplined Innovation’

We had to admit that we cannot get all of this right in one go. We might need what David Hargreaves would call ‘disciplined innovation’, selecting the high leverage opportunities, prioritising and then chasing the priorities relentlessly. We also have to produce the evidence about what works. Simply because our intentions are virtuous there is no reason for anyone else to believe that the outcomes are successful unless we can demonstrate that. This is not an argument for massed statistics and anyway pupil’s attainment outcomes are already measured. It is an argument for being clear what we expect the result of our local changes to be, setting out that stall at the beginning, establishing the baseline and monitoring it. If staff satisfaction, community appreciation or pupil happiness are the targets, then we need to have the courage to say so and prove it. None of those are bad things and none are likely to decrease students’ attainment! We will also

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Leadership

We recognised that leadership in these new circumstances is, as Andy Coleman said in his presentation ‘an art not a science’, no longer dependent on single professional leadership, now centred on the capacity to influence, stimulate, inspire and individualise. Professional knowledge and a person’s professional heritage remain a necessary part of their intrinsic value and their contribution but not sufficient a sufficient part for these new leadership roles. The processes of complex leadership become increasingly important.

3 Five outcomes for school and centre leaders

Lets assume that the medium really is the message. That means that the way we work together and value our varied contributions should model our work with and value for communities, families and above all young people. So then, how does all of the above translate into five sets of professional outcomes particular to leaders in multi-agency contexts? Is there an ELM Agenda (Every Leader Matters)?

To be healthy, school and centre leaders need, professionally:

- *To be offered and to create the development opportunities which enable them to do their work well.* Traditional, pathways which increase skills and understanding in a single profession will need to lead alternatively into multi-disciplinary experiences emphasising the processes of complex leadership. Many of the following bullet points in this section represent new activities for some or even many leaders. They deserve the opportunity to develop the associated skills or understanding. At the same time, they need to recognise and take development opportunities in a constant spirit of action research.
- *To work in a politically healthy environment.* It should be clear that the development of multi-disciplinary children's services is a sponsored priority for the national and local strategic agencies so that leaders can be confident their work is aligned with those expectations.

To be safe, school and centre leaders need, professionally,:

- *To take calculated risks without fear of a blame culture.* Leaders in multi-disciplinary teams will need to try out new ways of organising and delivering services. That unavoidably means taking some risks. Provided those are taken with due care, preparation and monitoring, leaders are entitled to the support of their senior colleagues if things do go wrong. With a strong enquiry approach there is a lot of value in learning how not to arrange our affairs.
- *To develop a sense of perspective.* On occasions, leaders in children's services are dealing with matters of life and death that are emotionally compelling. Most of the time, most leaders are not and a sense of perspective is then invaluable.

To enjoying and achieve, school and centre leaders need, professionally,:

- *To know what is expected of them.* Leaders can only reach stretching standards in their own work if it is clear what is expected of them and they believe that the expectation can be met. This is in part a matter of processes – the quality of how they work – and of outcomes – the changes they make in young people's lives. In either case, new policies need to be accompanied by unequivocal explanation of what is expected and how that aligns with current practice. At the same time, leaders need to know what they expect of themselves. An internal sense of ambition is as important if not more important than those that come from elsewhere.
- *To be able to achieve a reasonable work/life balance.* Development of services for young people should not be at the cost of the family or personal lives of the adults. Leaders generally expect to work hard and for longer hours than others in their services. Too many school leaders still believe that if they are responsible for something they must know all there is to know about it and be there when it is done. The system needs more support for distribution and delegation of leadership roles. Individuals need to be more confident about dispersing authority.

To participate, school and centre leaders need, professionally, :

- *To create the professional networks which would add value to their leadership.* Leadership partnerships will be an increasing feature of the children's services

landscape over coming years. No institution or service or community, still less any individual, has the capacity to deliver effective services in isolation.

- *To engage with policy-makers.* Decisions about these services need to be made so far as possible with the service deliverers and their clients or students.
- *To listen to their communities, families and students.* More of an obligation than an entitlement but it would leave too much of a gap if this final corner of the triangle of participation between policy-makers, professionals and service users wasn't written in.

To achieve economic well-being, school and centre leaders need, professionally,:

- *To have at their disposal the resources available for the work they have to do.* Resources will always fall short of the ideal but what is available should be deployed at the discretion of commissioned local providers. The independence of locally managed schools and the recent experience of their leaders as budget managers contrasts with the centralised and limited discretion on other service budgets and is creating tensions.